Whether it’s asking for a raise, giving a talk, blogging, or advocating for others, speaking out in the public domain can be challenging. Tara Moss, author of *Speaking Out: A 21st-Century Handbook for Women and Girls*, provides tips to help us speak out safely and effectively. LINDA MOON writes.

For children, speaking out is instinctive. Cultural conditioning teaches us to ‘shhh up’, while females who speak out are often viewed as unfeminine, emotional or bossy. But it’s important that we do speak out, for ourselves and for our world. At the Vancouver Peace Summit in 2009, the Dalai Lama said: “The world will be saved by the Western woman.”

Tara Moss, author of *Speaking Out* ($22.99, HarperCollins), cites a 2010 Global Media Monitoring Report, which found that around the world, fewer than one out of every four people we hear from or about in the media is female. “In positions of power and influence, women are still very much marginalised and massively outnumbered. The end result is that we are hearing women’s voices, their opinions and viewpoints less often.” While things are changing, Moss says, “they’ve still got a fair way to go.”

Building on 20 years’ experience in the public sphere as a journalist and human rights advocate, Moss’s book offers a practical guide on how to speak out as a female in the 21st century.

**Know your right to speak up**

While finding the courage to speak up can be difficult, Moss advises finding the courage to do so, reinforcing that it’s a right, not a privilege. “The most important aspect of speaking out is knowing in your bones that you have the right to. That is often something that people in marginalised groups don’t have a sense of, because they’ve been told since birth that they don’t have the right to speak out or to be heard.”

**Form a convincing argument**

Moss says that in order to be persuasive, you have to back your arguments up with rational statements and concrete data. Avoid using Wikipedia, online blogs or opinion pieces as sources of information. Instead, research and identify credible publications, studies and sources. “It’s also important to challenge your own argument and look at it from all angles,” she says. “If it can be pulled apart easily, you might want to rethink your argument.”

**Engage support**

Reaching out to others to creating support networks is energy well spent, says Moss.
"Certainly in advocacy circles it’s a very strong practice to actively create networks and reach out to people you see needing support," she says. One of her closest friendships started after Moss congratulated another writer on her book. "Sometimes friendships come from those simple communications. You just never know where those things are going to go and that’s how you build networks.

Choose a medium that suits you
"The two main ways people speak out are spoken word or written word," she says. "But there are a lot of other ways to participate and speak out. You could be organising protests or creating art that makes people think.” Other ways include photography, film, music and activism. When choosing writing as your medium, make your words count by making your message clear, relevant and purposeful. Avoid repetition and write with the reader in mind.

Use your voice
Our voices can convey things we don’t intend, such as distress, Moss says. "Speak calmly and slowly, at the lower end of your natural voice register. Try to breathe and speak from the diaphragm (down in the belly) rather than the chest or throat." She suggests deep breathing to calm nerves (belly) rather than the chest or throat. "You need to be able to control your voice, to project your points but trying to divert to something else (another context, culture and place)."

Moss advises to bring the conversation back on track. And while being aware of such tactics won’t stop them happening, they can empower you and help you take control of the conversation. "You realise it’s not about you," she says. "You can, as it were, dismiss the dismisser.”

Speaking out safely online
Today, a lot of communication occurs in the digital realm. "Unless it’s your personal blog, never read the comments "below the line," advises Moss. "They’re generally not very constructive spaces, and in particular, they’re areas where you can be targeted by those deliberately trying to incite anger and offence. You have to be able to manage your online life like you would your real “physical” life. If every time I walked into a particular establishment I had people hurling abuse at me, I wouldn’t keep walking into that establishment. It’s about balancing that freedom to go where you want to go, say what you want to say, but also look after yourself."

If you do come across anyone being abusive or aggressive, don’t hesitate to block and ban them. "For women and girls it often takes the forms of gender sexualised violent rhetoric," says Moss. In such instances, threats should be reported to the social media service. "These things are important for making your online experience as safe as possible,” Moss says. "You never know when something is going to impact you more than you thought it would.”

Moss believes the Internet is still a valuable forum for speaking up.

Dealing with criticism effectively
Part of speaking out is preparing for what’s to come, and dealing with what might come afterward. And criticism, though inevitable, isn’t a sign of failure. "Criticism can be vital for learning and growing and expanding your knowledge base," she says. "However, we need to be able to identify constructive criticism from the negative.” Constructive criticism addresses the argument, has a valid point and generally comes from someone with authority in the field, Moss explains in Speaking Out. However, "critics are not always right," she says. Deal with criticism by remaining as objective as possible.

Recognise diversionary tactics
"Also, be able to identify when someone is trying to silence you, is dismissing you, distorting the argument or otherwise trying to bully or demean you," says Moss. These diversionary tactics have one aim to divert the topic. Moss gives an example of someone trying to derail a conversation about domestic violence in Australia with the comment that women in the Middle East are worse off. "They’re not addressing your points but trying to divert to something else (another context, culture and place)."

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Practising self-care
Self-care is a vital aspect of speaking out. "It’s all very well and good to have someone speak out but they also need to be able to continue to speak out without burning out," says Moss. Those in advocacy work and counselling are susceptible to vicarious trauma (trauma related to working with trauma victims), she says. Knowing what it is, and how you can manage it, are key.

Moss admits learning to speak out can take time, hard work and practice. "I used to be terrified doing any public speaking, she confesses. Now in her 40s, the former model and author of 11 books, declares: “I found my voice!” ANH